

The Wartime Watch

“Dad?”

No answer.

“Daaad?”

Terry’s Dad sighed and looked up from the reception desk where he was busy with an untidy pile of papers.

“Yes, Terry - what is it now?”

“Were you alive in the war, Dad?”

Dad frowned. “It depends which war you mean. I was alive during the Falklands War and the Gulf War, of course. Why?”

“It’s for school. Everyone’s got to bring in something from the Second World War and give a talk about it.”

“I wasn’t born then,” said Dad. “When do you have to give this talk?”

“Er, tomorrow.”

Dad groaned. “Why do you always leave things till the last minute? I’m sorry, Terry. I’ve got all these bills to sort out. I’d like to help you, but -” Dad pointed to the huge pile of paper.

“Is there anything I can take into school?” asked Terry. “Is there anything in the hotel that’s really old?”

“Only the plumbing,” replied Dad. “Go and ask your mum. I’m far too busy. And next time, get yourself organized!”

Terry looked in the lounge, the dining room and the kitchen - no sign of Mum. He plodded upstairs towards the family's small flat on the top floor. He was going to be in trouble.

As Terry got to the third floor landing he noticed that the door leading to the attics was open. Mum must be up there, he thought. As he reached the top of the narrow stairs he heard sounds coming from the first attic room. Terry peered round the door. Mum was on her hands and knees staring at the skirting board.

"Mum?"

"I'm busy, can't it wait?"

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for holes. One of the guests said she saw a mouse, so I'm checking." Mum stood up. "What is it, Terry - but be quick."

"Do you know anything about the war - the Second World War, I mean?"

"Not really," said Mum. "Just that Grandpa came down here as an evacuee. That's how he met Grandma - at the local school, the same one you go to."

"What's an evacuee?" asked Terry.

"That's what they called the children from London and the other big cities who were sent to live in the country, or by the sea, so they'd be safe from the bombing."

"Bombing...?"

“Yes,” said Mum. “During the war the Germans bombed the big cities. Hundreds of planes every night bombed London, Liverpool and the other big cities.”

“Why did the Germans bomb London and Liverpool?”

“You don’t know much, do you Terry?” said Mum. “The Germans were the enemy in those days. Anyway, why are you asking me all this?”

“It’s for school. We’ve got to bring something in and talk about it, and it’s got to be something to do with the war. And it’s for tomorrow.”

“Oh, Terry,” sighed Mum, heading for the door. “Why do you always leave your homework till the last minute?”

Terry suddenly had a brilliant idea. “I know: I’ll phone Grandpa and ask him all about being an evacuee.”

“You’ll be lucky,” said Mum. “Grandpa and Grandma have gone to Spain for a week, remember? I’ve got mice to find. I’m sorry, Terry, but you’ll just have to sort it out yourself.”

Terry was all alone in the attic room - apart from the old-fashioned wardrobe. In the wardrobe, Terry knew, was the old lost property trunk. It was full of old things, but every time Terry took something out of the trunk strange things happened.

Terry thought for a moment. Dare he risk opening the trunk again? Yes, this was an emergency. He opened the wardrobe door and threw back the lid of the trunk. It was just as he’d first found it - except for the magician’s hat and the strong man’s leopard skin shorts which had caused so many problems. He peered into the trunk. There had to be something old and harmless he could take to school.

Terry plunged his hand into the trunk and rummaged around. His fingers closed around something cold and round. He pulled it out. It was an old-fashioned gold watch. On the back was engraved:

Time marches on

But these days will live

When we have all gone

June 1940

'I don't suppose it still works,' thought Terry. He turned the little gold knob on the top of the watch. Immediately the watch began to tick. Terry glanced down at his own watch: 5.30.

He started to turn the hands back to the correct time when the room began to spin. Everything seemed to whirl and blur, like a fairground roundabout but much, much faster.

"ello," said a voice. "Where d'you come from?"

"Uhhh?" Terry opened his eyes. He was sitting on a grassy bank with his back against a tall hedge. In front of him was a dusty country lane. Sitting next to him was a boy of his own age, but dressed in strange clothes. The boy was wearing a pair of knee-length grey shorts, a grey jacket, and he had a red and yellow striped cap perched on the back of his head.

"I ain't seen you round 'ere before," said the boy. "Are you an evacuee or somefink?"

"Er- yes, I suppose so," said Terry.

"Me too," said the boy. "I'm from Whitechapel - that's in London. I was sent down 'ere to get out of the Blitz. But I don't 'alf wish I was back there."

The boy looked suspiciously at Terry. "You foreign or something? You ain't 'alf got funny clothes."

"Er-no," said Terry.

"Only you can't be too careful these days..." The boy's voice dropped to a whisper. "They say there's German spies everywhere."

There was something very familiar about the boy. Terry was sure he'd seen him somewhere before.

"Ere - you got any chocolate?" asked the boy. "I've used up all me sweet ration. No more sweets 'til next month."

Terry felt in his pockets. "I've got this..." He held out a packet of bubblegum.

"Crikey!" said the boy. "That's just like the Yanks 'ave. But I've never seen that sort before. I'll swap you..."

And he pulled from his jacket pocket a tiny silver aeroplane.

"It's a Spitfire," he said proudly.

"What's a -"

But before Terry could finish his question there was a deafening roar. Two planes suddenly appeared overhead, just skimming the treetops.

"It's a dog-fight!" yelled the boy. "Come on, let's go and watch."

He ran a short way along the lane to a gate leading to a sloping grassy field.

"Come on!" shouted the boy. "You don't want to miss it!"

They ran up the slope as one of the planes started to climb, higher and higher into the clear, blue sky. The second plane followed, just a few metres behind.

“It’s a Messerschmitt!” yelled the boy, pointing excitedly to the plane in front. Terry could just see the black crosses painted on the undersides of the wings.

“And the one behind?” asked Terry.

“Blimey! Don’t you know nothing?” asked the other boy. “That’s a Spitfire - just like the one you’ve got. Look!”

Two bursts of what looked sparks came from the front edge of the Spitfire’s wing. A second later the rattle of machine-gun fire reached the boys. Smoke began to stream from the Messerschmitt’s tail.

“That’ll teach you!” screamed the boy, shaking his fist at the German plane. It levelled off for a moment before falling into a steep dive. Terry waited for the pilot to pull it up, but down it fell - faster and faster and faster. It smashed into a small clump of trees two hundred metres from where the boys were standing.

“He’s bailed out!” yelled the boy, pointing to a fluffy blob floating towards the ground.

The two boys gazed up as a parachute floated down into the field. The pilot hit the ground with a thump, just a few metres from where the boys were standing. The parachute floated down and covered him.

Slowly a figure crawled out from under the parachute. It was a young man of about 20 years old. He was dressed in a grey uniform and had a leather flying helmet on his head. He lay on the ground, beside his parachute,

groaning. Terry could see by the way his right leg was twisted that it was badly broken.

“Strewth!” said the boy. “What do we do now?”

“Shouldn’t we help him?” suggested Terry.

“But he’s a German!” said the boy.

Before they could do anything a loud voice bellowed across the field:

“Stand back, you boys. He may be armed!”

A fat policeman was hurrying up the slope. He was pushing an old-fashioned black bicycle. He dropped the bike and drew a long wooden truncheon from his pocket.

“Right, you!” He boomed at the young airman. “You - are - under - arrest. Do - you - understand?”

The young airman raised his head, nodded and then fainted.

“You two boys best go home,” said the policeman. “But I’ll be round to take your names later - for the official report. Speaking of which, would either of you happen to know the time. My watch seems to have - erm - stopped.”

Terry looked at his wristwatch: 5.30. That couldn’t be right. He reached into his pocket to check the old gold watch. But as he grasped the gold watch, the field, the trees, the boy, the policeman and the airman - everything began to spin, faster and faster.

Terry closed his eyes until the spinning stopped. When he opened them again, he was back in the attic room.

Terry looked at his watch: 5.30. It was working, but according to his watch no time had past. That was impossible. He reached into his jeans pocket for the gold watch. It wasn't there, but something else was. Terry pulled it out. It was the little silver plane.

Terry stared at the plane. He didn't have the watch anymore, but he did have something even better to take to school tomorrow. He also had a story to tell about the war. Maybe no one would believe him, but Terry knew it was true.